

INTERNATIONAL LONGSHORE AND WAREHOUSE UNION
PACIFIC COAST PENSIONERS ASSOCIATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
LABOR ARCHIVES OF WASHINGTON
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON LIBRARIES SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

DON BIRRER OF ILWU LOCAL 4, PCPA

INTERVIEWEE: DON BIRRER

INTERVIEWERS: RON MAGDEN

SUBJECTS: 1971 STRIKE; ACCIDENTA; VANCOUVER, WASHINGTON; LOCAL 4; LOCAL 8; GRAIN

LOCATION: 2013 PCPA CONVENTION

DATE: SEPTEMBER 16-18, 2013

INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:45:23

FILE NAME: BirrerDon_PCPA_2013_Video_acc6194-001.mp4

[00:00:00] **DON BIRRER:** Then you can get a job doing anything, even after the war. I went from one machine outfit to another. I got a job driving an oil truck for that co-op, Battleground Co-op, in the wintertime. I had it two years in a row. A guy I knew went to work on the waterfront, and I got a white card and went to work. That job was a four-month job, steady. Waterfront wasn't too steady then, if you recall. Then I went back and the dispatcher was Benson. They always called us guys "kids." He said, "Kid, you think you'll stay?" I said, "I'm gonna give her all I got." I stayed from that time on. You asked me the year. That's what's confusing. I can't—

[00:01:07] **RON MAGDEN:** Can't quite fix the year.

[00:01:10] **DON:** Well, yes, which year that I stayed.

[00:01:12] **RON:** 42 years you were on.

[00:01:15] **DON:** I worked 42; I've been retired 14 now.

[00:01:18] **RON:** 14?

[00:01:21] **DON:** Yes. Soon as the first of December, it'll be 14 years, yes.

[00:01:28] **RON:** About 1960 you came on the waterfront.

[00:01:31] **DON:** Yes, fifties, it was before that. I worked them two winters—

[00:01:37] **RON:** That's right—

[00:01:39] **DON:** —but 1960 is close enough, yep.

[00:01:41] **RON:** Yes. And then you were mostly bulk work?

[00:01:46] **DON:** Yes, lumber and sacks, yes. You've got to remember, back then white cards casuals traveled. We traveled in between ports. Then later on they stopped the casuals—well, I got registered. It didn't make much difference. I got to be a B-Man.

[00:02:08] **RON:** But you were traveling as far north maybe as Longview [Washington] ?

[00:02:12] **DON:** Longview? Yes, Longview port's where I worked lots of nights. The old timers, a guy by the name of Brooks says—you get to know these old guys. He says, "Don't pay any attention to that recorder. Come to the hall." I never forgot that. I picked up a lot of work that way. At night, porter would be short of help, you know. "Anybody wanna go pick up tapioca sacks?" Farm kids will do it, you know that.

[00:02:38] **RON:** Yes, yes.

[00:02:39] **DON:** A lot of them didn't go. I'd go. Them guys say to me, "Why in the hell don't you move over here?" I said, "Well, I like Vancouver."

[00:02:48] **RON:** [laughs] You like the small town!

[00:02:50] **DON:** Yep, yep, true.

[00:02:56] **RON:** Yes, yes. The cargo, then, did you ever do hides?

[00:03:00] **DON:** Oh, god, yes.

[00:03:03] **RON:** You did the worst.

[00:03:03] **DON:** Yes, yes. The world's worst, yes.

[00:03:10] **RON:** Were you there for the '71 strike?

[00:03:12] **DON:** Yes, I was. Lois Stranahan and—

[00:03:19] **RON:** Oh, wonderful lady.

[00:03:20] **DON:** Yes, what was his name?

[00:03:24] **RON:** Jess.

[00:03:25] **DON:** Jess. Him, me, and three or four other guys, we printed the paper every day. I was part of that. I'll tell you a little thing we did. We didn't start it, but The Oregonian or The [Oregon] Journal was having press problems. We didn't steal the papers, and it took them two weeks to figure out what we were doing. The paper was a dime. We take them, put a dime in, and we'd put the papers up on top of the box.

[00:03:51] **RON:** [laughs]

[00:03:51] **DON:** People would help themselves. We didn't steal them.

[00:03:53] **RON:** No, just help themselves.

[00:03:55] **DON:** It took the people two weeks to decide, "We ain't going do that in the summertime."

[00:04:04] **RON:** Pretty good trick!

[00:04:05] **DON:** Yes, it really was. We did that every morning. Wherever one of their boxes was, put the papers up on the top. We didn't take the papers.

[00:04:13] **RON:** Are they really opposed to organized labor?

[00:04:16] **DON:** Oh, god, were they ever. Poor press men. They got a new press in—automated was a big deal, yes.

[00:04:25] **RON:** You were there when Big Bob [McEllrath] came into the local?

[00:04:31] **DON:** Well, yes, I don't remember—

[00:04:32] **RON:** Remember his dad?

[00:04:34] **DON:** Well, I know his dad, yes. His dad was there for a while. When they put the [Trans-Alaska] Pipeline through from Alaska down, he was a truck driver. He quit and went up there to drive a truck with his dad. Then he come back and they registered him again.

Yes, I did know him, yes.

[00:05:01] **RON:** The father had been in the army.

[00:05:05] **DON:** Yes.

[00:05:08] **RON:** But he didn't run for office or anything, did he?

[00:05:11] **DON:** His dad?

[00:05:12] **RON:** His dad.

[00:05:13] **DON:** No, not that I know of, no. No, I know he didn't, no.

[00:05:15] **RON:** He just worked in the hold—

[00:05:19] **DON:** Just like you and I, same thing.

[00:05:23] **RON:** Quiet man, or. . . ?

[00:05:25] **DON:** Yes, sort of, yes. You'd never dream Bob would go as far as he went.

[00:05:37] **RON:** How did he do that? How did he go from Vancouver to being the international president?

[00:05:43] **DON:** To tell you the truth, I never followed him too much because he came in after I was there. I don't know where he got started, just can't remember it all.

[00:05:58] **RON:** Was he a dispatcher?

[00:06:01] **DON:** No, Bob was never a dispatcher.

[00:06:06] **RON:** Did he talk at the meetings?

[00:06:10] **DON:** I'll tell you one thing—this is my own opinion. I never missed five meetings my whole life on the waterfront. The only time I missed a meeting, I was the president at the time for a couple of years. I was in Tacoma, and I missed the meeting because we were up there. But I bragged to myself, I'd be willing to bet you I never missed five meetings. I was in the hospital one time. I remember that.

[00:06:43] **RON:** Did the local have brittle relations with the PMA [Pacific Maritime Association] , with the employers?

[00:06:47] **DON:** Well, yea, I was an LRC [Labor Relations Committee] man for two years and we got along with them. Some of them were a little tough on them. But I'm not aware we got into any dispute, knock-down drag-out deals, you know.

[00:07:16] **RON:** You never went to the mat with them, arbitration?

[00:07:20] **DON:** No, no. I was president there for a while, when a ship came in—this was a while after that. The lousy captain shut the hot water off on the crew. We had a guy by the name of Bruce Weir there. He was an old seaman, tough old guy. Anyway, we got around to it, and we called Posey—

[00:07:49] **RON:** Oh, I know him!

[00:07:50] **DON:** Well, you know what we did? We went down and talked to him about it. The local bought him groceries

and we took him out to dinner at night. Anyway, over the whole thing—that ship had come into the shipyards in Portland and never paid the bill and left. He tied that ship up there over a federal thing and didn't let them go. That was one thing we did for them kids, and half of them went home. They were from the Philippines. Half of them didn't come off because they had no better place to go than the ship. We straightened him out a little bit. Old Bruce [Weir] did that. He's gone now, but—

[00:08:31] **RON:** He was a character.

[00:08:31] **DON:** He was a tough old seaman, is what he was.

[00:08:33] **RON:** Did you know Roscoe Craycraft, in Portland?

[00:08:37] **DON:** No, I did not, no.

[00:08:38] **RON:** Did you know many Portland longshore?

[00:08:41] **DON:** Yes, not so much as personal as you worked with them.

[00:08:45] **RON:** Just working.

[00:08:46] **DON:** On the waterfront, you don't know the name. You just know who they are.

[00:08:49] **RON:** They know you as "Red."

[00:08:51] **DON:** Yes, or they don't know me—

[00:08:53] **RON:** They don't know your last name.

[00:08:55] **DON:** They don't know nothing, no.

[00:09:01] **RON:** In Vancouver you had your work, but you could also have traveled to Longview—

[00:09:10] **DON:** Oh, I traveled to Longview and Portland a lot. I traveled anytime there was a night call, and I was in haul, I went to work.

[00:09:16] **RON:** Did you call in, or how did you know that there might be a possibility of work?

[00:09:26] **DON:** You called the dispatch. The old timers tell you, "Don't pay attention because you can get a job from out port." Even if they're slow, somebody will want to go to work, you know. Another old guy told me, "You want to come in a week before Christmas, stay up until New Year's. Lots of longshoremen take them two weeks off." I made a lot of money over that deal."

[00:09:50] **RON:** I see, you worked when others wouldn't.

[00:09:52] **DON:** Oh, gosh, who wants to throw tapioca sacks?

[00:09:55] **RON:** Yes, they're terrible.

[00:09:58] **DON:** I'm a farm kid. [laughs]

[00:09:59] **RON:** But tapioca is one of the hardest to handle, isn't it?

[00:10:02] **DON:** Oh, god, they're not very big, and they're heavier than heck, and they're slick. It's a tough job.

[00:10:08] **RON:** A lot of that was hand-stowed when you first started.

[00:10:13] **DON:** It was all hand-stowed, yes.

[00:10:16] **RON:** And then that gradually disappeared?

[00:10:18] **DON:** Well, went in to containers, I guess.

[00:10:21] **RON:** The container world came in. Vancouver was still pretty much a bulk port?

[00:10:27] **DON:** Oh, yes. Sacks and lumber. We had some logs, but nothing like Longview, though. I don't

think—they sort of gave up on the logs, and that was the end of that.

[00:10:43] **RON:** The employers you worked with were pretty nice people, or could they be ornery?

[00:10:48] **DON:** Well, it just depends how you take them. You have to understand an employer. For some reason, I did. I don't care. I know one thing, Jones Stevedores [Jones Stevedoring Company], I would say, they don't like it but you can sit down and talk to them. Certain places they're just like you and I. They're no different from anybody else.

[00:11:09] **RON:** They're real old, 1858. They have the first stevedore company.

[00:11:16] **DON:** Yes, yes. They had good superintendents and then they had some bummers.

[00:11:23] **RON:** Yea, I knew some of that.

[00:11:27] **DON:** Did you know—he was a little guy. His last name was Campbell. He came with Jones Stevedore. I can't remember what the deal there was, but I got to know him pretty well too. Cocky little guy. He'd slap you that quick and not even know why. Nobody trusted him, but you get along with them guys. He understood what a longshoreman was. He was one of the original five that Jones kept. Whatever happened to him, he's one of them guys.

[00:12:05] **RON:** Clayton Jones.

[00:12:06] **DON:** Well, I knew who Clayton was. This guy was a walker, though.

[00:12:10] **RON:** Oh, I see.

[00:12:11] **DON:** Campbell was a walker. I can't remember his first name, though.

[00:12:14] **RON:** Do you remember the worst day on the waterfront? The worst cargo handling?

[00:12:24] **DON:** You want me to tell you something? I never had bad days on the waterfront.

[00:12:31] **RON:** Not even with hides?

[00:12:33] **DON:** Well, but I knew tomorrow would be different. That's the way I looked at everything. We were working in Portland under folks still up there. Willy was a great big old guy from Arkansas, come up here, told me he never had any shoes until he was so long. I can't think of his name right now, but worked with him a lot. Neat guy, not a rough and tumble, but you'd think he was like a bear, you know.

They hired four extra guys. We had eight men in a gang. It was August, hotter than a hub's hell out there. They had blowers in there blowing air into us. We'd work twenty minutes or a half hour and come out. Willy couldn't—as soon as he walked through the door, he'd start puking. So we left him outside. You put him on the board and we were running him in the rollers. Willy couldn't handle it. He'd choke to death in there. Couldn't stand the smell. It was terrible. It was the middle of August. It was on Cliff Hoff's gang, I remember that. And it was tough.

[00:13:42] **RON:** Oh, gee. In the career, and then as president, did you go to caucuses?

[00:13:56] **DON:** No, you know, the political end of the thing was not my thing. But the working end of it, I had no problems with any of them guys.

[00:14:04] **RON:** But you were elected president several times?

[00:14:06] **DON:** Yes, I won two years.

[00:14:11] **RON:** The work you did as president was mostly meeting the employer. You had a dispatcher, and you as president greeted people. You took care of the meetings.

[00:14:30] **DON:** Yes, well, that way, you know back then it was a whole different ball game than is it now. You get along with superintendents and the safety people, and that really concerned me more than anything.

[00:14:48] **RON:** Did you ever have an accident?

[00:14:51] **DON:** I had one bad one in Longview. I fell off a ladder. We were rolling big paper rolls. It was the 17th day of January, and I'll never forget it. I suffer from that to this day. I had rain gear on; I had a big pair of boots on with liners in 'em because the wind was blowing 90 miles an hour up there. We had a ladder; we had it tied on

top. Whatever reason I tipped over, I don't know. Rufus Sacconi was a guy from Hawai'i, hollered at me, and I turned like this. The ladder flipped just like that. That boot went through in one rung, and, when I hit the deck with my back, my hard hat flew off. It caught that ankle; I couldn't get that boot between the rungs. It pulled the ligaments in my leg clean to my back. That was an accident. I went to the doctor, and he says, "I'm gonna put you in the hospital." I said, "Really?" He said, "I'll tell you what I want you to do. I want you to go home and come in here three times a day," and take this treatment he was going to give me in my back. It took the soreness out. Then later on, he told me, "I'm gonna tell you something. It won't hurt you now, but 25 or 30 years from now you'll pay for that." And I have. This is why I wear—what do you call them socks?

[00:16:20] **RON:** Oh, yes, the ones that keep your feet circulated.

[00:16:23] **DON:** Well, it helps the nerves in your legs because this thing [points to his head] don't tell you to pick your feet up. [? Carter's?] building me a pair—they already took the cast of this leg. It's going to be made of plastic, and they're going to try to help me some more.

Soon as I get out of here tomorrow morning, we're heading for Yellowstone Park.

[00:16:50] **RON:** Are you?

[00:16:51] **DON:** Yes, we're driving.

[00:16:52] **RON:** Have you been to the park before?

[00:16:54] **DON:** Never, never.

[00:16:54] **RON:** Oh, you'll love it. Awful close to snow time.

[00:17:00] **DON:** Well, I just put a new set of snow tires on, too.

[00:17:03] **RON:** All right, well, you'll be ready.

[00:17:04] **DON:** I'm ready for it.

[00:17:05] **RON:** I grew up in that area.

[00:17:07] **DON:** Did you?

[00:17:07] **RON:** Oh, yes, and September's about the snow time.

[00:17:11] **DON:** We'd have went earlier, but my wife couldn't get off work. Then the convention, so that put it up until tomorrow. She's the one that takes care of the hotels. I don't fool with that. The GPS, that's her job and hotels—she loves to do that. She's got that lined up two months ago.

[00:17:40] **RON:** Ah, great.

[00:17:42] **DON:** I hate it. I don't even want to talk to the people.

[00:17:48] **RON:** Yellowstone Park, during World War II, was closed, and I got to go through it then. I was alone with the whole park to myself. Maybe 50 years later I went back, and thousands of people were. . .

[00:18:08] **DON:** A young guy who works on the waterfront, he's a lift driver down there. I worked with him. I said, "What do you do in the wintertime?" He says, "Wait till after Labor Day and go to Yellowstone." He's been there a couple times. He said, "Wait till the crowd's gone."

[00:18:23] **RON:** Yes, it's a beautiful place.

[00:18:26] **DON:** We couldn't coordinate the time. That's why we got stuck down there. We wanted to go the first part. She couldn't get off.

[00:18:35] **RON:** When did you retire?

[00:18:39] **DON:** Nineteen ninety-nine, the last day of November. We had a rally in Seattle. Our papers were all made out. I called the dispatcher and said, "I ain't coming back to work." Pulled my plug out of the board, went to the rally in Seattle. Me and my friend [? Mialane?] . Ronny's from Stockton; that's where he come from.

[00:19:10] **RON:** It's interesting that in the longshore world, there might be retirement parties, but not many.

[00:19:19] **DON:** Not many, no.

[00:19:20] **RON:** You just go, and that's it.

[00:19:24] **DON:** I worked at the elevator at the time. Just the week before that we had a retirement party. Coffee time, you know.

[00:19:28] **RON:** Forty-two years.

[00:19:35] **DON:** Few bottles of whisky and some pop. I don't drink anymore. Well, I never did drink. But anyway, nobody got out of hand. They don't shut the elevator down, but everybody comes down. If you can get

out. It's just a lot of food.

[00:19:50] **RON:** The membership in Local 4, has it steadily declined? Or does it go up and down?

[00:19:58] **DON:** Well, they got too many people now over this grain thing, you know. You take 44 jobs lost in that grain facility, now. Whether they're lost or not, scabs are doing it. That's a lot of work out of Vancouver. Where you take some big local—what's 44 jobs? I think there's around 160 members there now.

[00:20:23] **RON:** About how many were there when you started?

[00:20:26] **DON:** Well, had to be somewhere 100-120. Right in there, yes. Oh, you're talking about when I started on the waterfront?

[00:20:39] **RON:** Yes.

[00:20:39] **DON:** Boy, I can't tell you. When I worked at the elevator, it was that many. There might have been that many, yep.

[00:20:51] **RON:** But the history of the local, it's always been in the shadow of Portland.

[00:20:58] **DON:** Well, in a sense. You know what Harry [Bridges] said? I happen to know Harry—not good, but I made it a point to meet him when I was a young guy. He says, "You guys ain't got no business being separate. It's too close. You oughta be one local."

But, you want my opinion? I don't have anything against Local 8. I'm glad to stay with Local 4.

[00:21:20] **RON:** There were merger talks.

[00:21:22] **DON:** Oh, yes!

[00:21:24] **RON:** Every once in a while.

[00:21:26] **DON:** When I was president, I took 30 guys. Somebody said, "How come you don't meet together?" I got 30 guys to go over to one of their meetings over there. Were you ever at one of Portland's meetings?

[00:21:38] **RON:** Oh, yes, I have been, and they're wild.

[00:21:40] **DON:** Yes, they're wild. And you know how they adjourn? Everybody leaves. They don't call for an adjournment. Out the door they go. Pretty soon there's nobody left. And I've been to more than one or two when I was president. Go over there for some reason, miss my own meeting.

[00:21:58] **RON:** It's the oldest union on the coast.

[00:22:04] **DON:** Is it?

[00:22:06] **RON:** Eighteen sixty-eight.

[00:22:07] **DON:** Is that right?

[00:22:08] **RON:** Pretty old.

[00:22:08] **DON:** When'd you say 4 come in?

[00:22:15] **RON:** Nineteen seventeen.

[00:22:19] **DON:** Nineteen seventeen?

[00:22:19] **RON:** Yes, and it came in as—it wasn't general cargo. It was a general longshore and warehouse union. That was its title. It was a combined union of the warehousemen and the longshore workers even then. It was during World War I. They were organized probably by people from Portland.

[00:22:56] **DON:** Uh-huh, is that right?

[00:23:00] **RON:** The next time I get to come down to Vancouver, I'd love to go see what the archives have on that.

[00:23:10] **DON:** I'll go down and talk to them.

[00:23:11] **RON:** Yes, tell her that I'm doing a book. If she needs any credentials, I'd be glad to. I've done a book for Seattle, and Tacoma. Love to see about Vancouver. I'm looking for information on Bob McEllrath, too.

[00:23:43] **DON:** I don't have much on Bob because he was one of the younger people. That ain't a group I ever worked with.

[00:23:53] **RON:** Right, you were with the older A-Men.

[00:23:57] **DON:** Oh, yes, yes.

[00:23:59] **RON:** The local was basically worker-oriented. Was there any division in it between conservatives and liberals?

[00:24:11] **DON:** Political, you mean?

[00:24:14] **RON:** Yes.

[00:24:15] **DON:** I don't think so, not as far as I was concerned. We didn't have no radicals. We had some guys that were off the wall, but you sort of ignore them. Not that maybe they were wrong, but there were so few of them. I remember some of the guys—when the credit union came along, I didn't belong to the credit union. They bought a modular home and put it in the back of the hall. "What are you doing, then?" We bought that piece of ground, you know, and they was opposed to it. It went on anyway.

[00:24:50] **RON:** But just small things.

[00:24:52] **DON:** Yes, no big things.

[00:24:54] **RON:** No big division of the group?

[00:24:58] **DON:** No.

[00:24:59] **RON:** Did Harry come to Vancouver?

[00:25:05] **DON:** Yes.

[00:25:05] **RON:** He did?

[00:25:06] **DON:** Well, want me to tell you why?

[00:25:08] **RON:** Yes!

[00:25:10] **DON:** You can quote this. Harry come to Vancouver because somebody didn't like him in Portland.

[00:25:19] **RON:** Oh, I know.

[00:25:19] **DON:** You know what I'm talking about. So he come over here. I can't say that I knew him very well. I knew him well enough to know he didn't call me by my name. "Vancouver," that's what he called me.

[00:25:34] **RON:** He didn't have too much of a flair for names.

[00:25:39] **DON:** No, no. Where I first met him was—was it Vietnam, when we stopped loading cargo? It was Vietnam. Anyway, me and a friend of mine, somebody told him that I was going to Seattle and I was going to meet Harry. And that's what I was going to do. My friend Ben—he's gone now—he said, "Can I go with you?" I said sure! I said, "You drive and I'll buy the food and pay for the gas." That's how come I went up there. When the colonel told him that morning, "If you don't load the ship, the Army's going to be here in the morning."

That's the first time we met him and shook his hand.

[00:26:28] **RON:** Did you know Jimmy Herman?

[00:26:29] **DON:** Yes, I did.

[00:26:31] **RON:** Did he come very often?

[00:26:32] **DON:** Well, not very often. He was after Harry, you know. Brilliant man. You maybe heard about the lumber that was dumped out the shipyards? Big Bob was the instigator of that. That was his deal. We were all there.

[00:26:54] **RON:** Tell me about it.

[00:26:56] **DON:** Well I don't know how to tell other than it just happened in a flash, like that! It happened one morning. I didn't know about it, but I helped put it back together.

[00:27:11] **RON:** Oh did you?

[00:27:11] **DON:** Yea. But they jumped in there. Big Bob was the instigator of it all. They took some young guys. They just run in and run out. All you do is you clip them bands and the top loads just went like that. [waves hands] And they were in there and out of there in 20 minutes. Less than that. The policemen never bothered them. By the time the police got there, everybody was back out on the street.

[00:27:41] **RON:** But they did arrest him? Or did they? Did they get him?

[00:27:47] **DON:** I don't think—did they arrest anybody over that?

[00:27:50] **RON:** They might have.

[00:27:51] **DON:** Well, they didn't bother us anyway.

[00:27:53] **RON:** They couldn't prove it, so they didn't push it.

[00:27:56] **DON:** We went back the next morning, and Brady furnished all the equipment and the banding. A whole bunch of us went back. We put it all back, banded it all up. Brady brought the coffee wagon up that morning. She come up and they bought everything that was on the thing.

[00:28:18] **RON:** Were there any other antics like that you remember?

[00:28:22] **DON:** Well, I can't remember. That was the one—that happened so fast, you didn't know it happened.

[00:28:29] **RON:** They just got that urge and did it.

[00:28:32] **DON:** Jimmy and all them planned that. I don't know whether it was his idea.

[00:28:38] **RON:** Jimmy?

[00:28:38] **DON:** Herman. It was a quiet thing. About ten people knew about it, what was going to happen. When they went into action—I guess they drove over there. But they run there and out of there in 15 minutes, or 20 minutes. 8 or 10 guys, and that was enough to look like a disaster, like a hurricane hit the place.

[00:29:09] **RON:** [laughing] Wish we had a picture of it.

[00:29:12] **DON:** Yes, too bad you don't.

[00:29:16] **RON:** Did you go to caucus? You must have been.

[00:29:19] **DON:** No, I did not.

[00:29:20] **RON:** Never did. You stayed. You were very much—

[00:29:24] **DON:** Vancouver was my thing. Ship deals was my thing. I went to grain negotiations and stuff like that. They weren't over my head, but it didn't interest me. You work on the dock. I never had any trouble with any superintendent or any of them people.

[00:29:41] **RON:** Do you have any idea of why grain has been so contentious? When you look at it from 1904 to the present, it's always been just like a cancer sore. The problem dealing with them, the operators. If you look at the history of the Columbia River, they're selfish as hell.

[00:30:09] **DON:** Well, you know, it makes a lot of money for Vancouver, when you're a small local. I worked steady there for 11 years loading ships. Ships over here, we're over here in another place. Guy comes out one day, United Harvest took over, and, gosh, I can't remember his name. I asked him how come he come out here.

He said, “Well, I was a young guy. I worked for an outfit back in Duluth or wherever. If you ever get a west coast subsidiary or an elevator, I’d like to walk.” That’s how come he come out here. Jim was his name. Neat guy, smart guy. I don’t know how long he was here, two or three years, and he got cancer. It’s a true story.

He asked me sometime, “How’d you learn all this?” I said, “Well, when they overhauled, I grew up with this the last eight or nine years.” They overhauled that thing three different times. Make it go faster, bigger belt, bigger—Peco dumping grain. He come to work, and he got cancer. I didn’t know what was wrong. Pretty soon less and less. He wasn’t here three years and cancer wiped him out. Smart guy.

[00:31:30] **RON:** There’s supposed to be study on the higher incidence of cancer amongst those who work in the grain.

[00:31:38] **DON:** Is that true?

[00:31:38] **RON:** Yes, I’m sure it’s true. The study has been going on for 30 years. Johns Hopkins University. I think there’s a restriction now on how many days you can work in the grain. There were four in Tacoma that came down with stomach cancer. They had worked only in the grain. That’s all they wanted to work. They came down about the same time with cancer.

[00:32:17] **DON:** Some of the chemicals they were putting on grain at that time. . . .

[00:32:19] **RON:** Yes, chemicals, right. I’d heard that.

[00:32:23] **DON:** We used to put that on to kill the weevil. I remember that.

[00:32:34] **RON:** Did you put that on? The longshoremen actually put it on when it came out of the grain car?

[00:32:41] **DON:** Seems like we put it on certain stuff. I can’t remember if we poured it into a thing, and when the thing would turned on, it would spray it on the belt.

[00:32:52] **RON:** Oh, I see.

[00:32:53] **DON:** I think it was, yes. It was clear, just like kerosene, but it wasn’t oil. I think it evaporated in time. I can’t remember what the stuff was.

[00:33:06] **RON:** Was there a high incidence of accidents by Vancouver longshoremen?

[00:33:14] **DON:** I don’t think over anything else.

[00:33:17] **RON:** How many fatalities? Anybody in your career working in Vancouver?

[00:33:24] **DON:** A guy got killed on a barge, I can remember that. Who was the other one?

[00:33:29] **RON:** There were two, huh?

[00:33:33] **DON:** The elevator, what happened with that? I think something broke on the lady—they used to have a lady down in there—I can’t recall what happened. Coming up the ladder, you got a couple.

[00:33:47] **RON:** Two or three?

[00:33:48] **DON:** Yes. What was the other one? I can't recall.

[00:33:57] **RON:** Were they buried together? Did the union bury them, or did the family?

[00:34:02] **DON:** I don't know that. I don't remember at that time whether that was part of the contract, was it?

[00:34:08] **RON:** Yes, it was.

[00:34:12] **DON:** They paid money, like they do.

[00:34:13] **RON:** Yes, right, but they could be together or they could be with their family. That's why I was after.

[00:34:20] **DON:** I don't know.

[00:34:23] **RON:** In the early years, they were usually buried together. They were single men.

In World War II, you could probably get a job almost anywhere.

[00:34:39] **DON:** Oh yes, gee, yes. That's why you went to work at 14, wiping jackets of locomotives. Didn't make much money. But I can tell you the shipyards was paying \$1.20/hour. So my dad worked there.

[00:34:57] **RON:** Not much.

[00:34:58] **DON:** That was a lot of money then.

[00:34:59] **RON:** Oh, was it?

[00:35:00] **DON:** Oh yes.

[00:35:05] **RON:** Did you belong to a union?

[00:35:10] **DON:** Yes, I did.

[00:35:12] **RON:** So you've been union all your life?

[00:35:14] **DON:** All my life. I belonged to the Teamsters for a while when I drove truck. Yes, I have.

[00:35:19] **RON:** When did you start coming to pension meetings or conventions like this?

[00:35:29] **DON:** Like this? I've been retired 14 years. I've been to 14 of those. I haven't missed one.

[00:35:36] **RON:** And you like it?

[00:35:38] **DON:** Yes, because something tells me, 'You must.' This is a big crowd we had here this time.

[00:35:46] **RON:** You bet it is. Biggest they've ever had.

[00:35:48] **DON:** Biggest they've ever had.

[00:35:49] **RON:** And a wonderful convention.

[00:35:50] **DON:** We put on a good one. Other people have. Canada puts on a good one. You know the [San] Pedro got lots of people so you get quite a few people there. But they got lots of retirees, too. Percentage-wise I don't think they do that great because there's thousands of people down there. I don't know whether that hotel brings it in, but everybody brags about that hotel. You like it?

[00:36:17] **RON:** Oh, I do. You betcha.

[00:36:20] **DON:** We had it there the last time, five years ago. That ain't my thing. In fact, I was supposed to see about the sandwiches. Barbara said to do that. Then they didn't use them. Jerry took care of the barbeque deal. That was just ordered, had Buster's come in and do it.

[00:36:53] **RON:** Well, it was a fine convention.

[00:36:55] **DON:** The whole thing went great.

[00:37:00] **RON:** Everybody gets ready for the next contract negotiations. That's about what life was like, wasn't it?

[00:37:06] **DON:** Yes, yes.

[00:37:07] **RON:** Going from contract to contract?

[00:37:10] **DON:** That's all you had to live for. That was it, yes.

[00:37:12] **RON:** And you sat there and read it. And kept track of the contract.

[00:37:16] **DON:** Well, not too much. I went to the elevator and worked 11 years there. After they put the big Pico in. Either the tug boat made the mistake or the river pilot made it. He run into the pier out front, and he dumped that thing in the river. Well, everybody went back to the hall. About three years before retired. I worked the elevator a lot, but I never went back steady. I could've went back, but I didn't want to. I really liked the waterfront, the only thing, the weather gets to you. You get tired of the cold and the wet weather.

[00:37:59] **RON:** Yes, you bet. You survived.

[00:38:04] **DON:** Yes, that's right.

[00:38:06] **RON:** Are you the oldest Vancouver longshoreman?

[00:38:10] **DON:** Am I now?

[00:38:11] **RON:** Yes.

[00:38:14] **DON:** You mean retired?

[00:38:15] **RON:** Yes.

[00:38:18] **DON:** Jiminy, who's 89?

[00:38:20] **RON:** Oh, you got one.

[00:38:24] **DON:** No, Ed Blair's older than I am. He's 90. He's still going, yes. He was in the elevator. There might be somebody else. I think Ed's 92. I'm not sure.

[00:38:41] **RON:** When I come back, you said you had a friend, that you might be. . .

[00:38:44] **DON:** I'll bring Danny with me. He's 68 years old, but he's so busy doing his stuff. He bought some land out here from a timber company, about 80 acres. You'd have to go see what he does. This guy can do anything. He was a millwright; he worked for the port. He's one of these guys, you name it, he can make it. He's made stuff the stevedores have copied and shipped it to California. But you ought to see his shop. It's fabulous.

[00:39:20] **RON:** We'll ask him to show us.

[00:39:20] **DON:** You've got to talk to him. He's a great big guy. He's 6'4". Quiet, easy-going.

[00:39:35] **RON:** This is a good friend?

[00:39:38] **DON:** Oh, yes! We go to the kids—I call them kids; they're 40 years old—we go on meeting night. Me and whoever else, we're always there. We go and cover the picket lines while they're having the meeting.

[00:39:56] **RON:** Is it sort of a small local, and everybody knows everybody?

[00:40:04] **DON:** Well, yes, but there's a lot of differences with the kids of today than back when I was young. The last time I was there, or the time before, I buy pizza and take it down to them at three o'clock in the afternoon. This young gal come over and sit and listen. I tell stories. Certain people like to hear that stuff. I asked her, "How long?" She'd been a book man for six years. She sat there most of the time. Danny was off somewhere else, and a couple other guys were there, listening to us tell different stories. Not bad things, but old guys—

[00:40:46] **RON:** Yes, people like the stories.

[00:40:50] **DON:** Yes, she sat there that whole time we was there. It was about an hour and half meeting before they came back down. I didn't ask her how old she was, but she was maybe 35 years old.

[00:41:06] **RON:** Do you have women in the local now?

[00:41:08] **DON:** Oh yes, quite a few. 15 or 20.

[00:41:12] **RON:** Oh my.

[00:41:12] **DON:** More than you'd think. I know it's less than 20, because I asked them one time, "How many girls you got?" We had them there before I left though, two or three.

[00:41:26] **RON:** Gradually, they're growing.

[00:41:28] **DON:** Yes, yes. They're percentage-wise bigger than, you know.

[00:41:32] **RON:** Did you handle much equipment like a top pick or. . . ?

[00:41:38] **DON:** The only thing I ever did was I drove lift off and on. I used to do that on a farm, drive tractors

and stuff. That's old hat stuff. The big thing, I worked a grain elevator and loaded ships.

[00:41:55] **RON:** You handle the hose?

[00:41:57] **DON:** Well, no, I'm in the control room.

[00:41:58] **RON:** You're in the control room? Oh, you were the control man. Ok.

[00:42:03] **DON:** The last five years, yes.

[00:42:06] **RON:** It's the hose man that's got the tough job.

[00:42:08] **DON:** I'll tell you what I did do, though, way back. You ever board grain?

[00:42:13] **RON:** No, but I've heard about it.

[00:42:14] **DON:** I was pretty good.

[00:42:16] **RON:** Into the wings?

[00:42:17] **DON:** Yea. I'll tell you a little story. Got a call in the hall one morning, they need two board men at Local 8 in Portland. And so, the guy who is now walking boss is retired; he lives out in Washougal. So I said, "I'll go." And, Brecker, in fact—I was a single guy at that time, so I don't know if he had ever boarded grain before. Anyway, I said, "I'm going." "Want me to go with you?" "Come on, let's go."

So we get over to Terminal 4, supercargo says, "Well we don't need you 'til about two o'clock." So we went off, bumming around downtown, I don't know, we got there at ten. Anyway, when we got back, we were boarding grain. They had a list in the ship and they couldn't get it out. And I don't know if it's the superintendent or the walking boss, he says, "There's no water on this side. He's all pumped dry." The supercargo says, "Board that wing over there for me, will you? That's all I want. Just board that wing out."

So we're boarding it. I don't know just how that elevator worked, but you get a 60-ton shot out of a small tank. So we're forward of the number one hatch, boarding the wing up. Pretty soon he hollered up, "Get the hell out of there! What are you doing down there?" "You said board that wing out. That's what you said." He said, "I didn't know you could do that." I said, "Well, that's what you got." He said, "All I wanted you to do was flatten it out a little bit." I said, "We could have done that, easy. But, you didn't say that. You said, 'Board that wing out.'" He said, "Get the hell out of there." That was the end of that. But he said, "That was my mistake." I said, "Well, that's what you said." That's what you do; you board the wing out."

Yep, I boarded a lot of grain. I had a partner—that day he wasn't there, but we worked together many years boarding grain.

[00:44:16] **RON:** Well, I plan to come down and see you next month.

[00:44:19] **DON:** Are you?

[00:44:20] **RON:** October. And your partner.

[00:44:24] **DON:** Well, if I can get him to come. We go to the meeting every meeting night because he stops by

and picks me up. I'll get a hold of him.

[00:44:34] **RON:** Yes, could we meet at the hall?

[00:44:36] **DON:** Yes, I'm sure we can.

[00:44:37] **RON:** I'd like that.

[00:44:41] **DON:** I'll talk to Clark. They got dispatchers now—they used to have days off. I don't think they're round the clock, but they have a night and a day dispatcher. I think they do. I'm not positive.

[00:45:00] **RON:** You can ask if I can come, and I appreciate it.

[00:45:05] **DON:** I'll find out.

[00:45:06] **RON:** Ok, well, we got to get out of the room.

[00:45:08] **DON:** Oh, that's right. You rented this out.

[00:45:12] **RON:** They wouldn't give me an extension.

[00:45:14] **DON:** They usually do, though, don't they?

[00:45:15] **RON:** Yes! They were really cryptic. "No, we've got your room already booked."

[00:45:20] **DON:** Oh, I see. So is it ending at twelve?

[00:45:23] **RON:** I know that. Twelve is when I'm supposed to be out. Well, what we can do, we can meet again.